

Summary

1 This briefing has been prepared by the National Audit Office to provide the new members of the Environmental Audit Committee an overview of sustainable development as a whole. Sustainable development is a devolved issue and this briefing covers government policy in England with a brief overview of the work of the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We have prepared this briefing alongside a separate document for the Committee covering related environmental protection issues in more detail.

England's progress to sustainable development

2 Sustainable development aims to integrate economic, environmental and social needs, to support the quality of life of current and future generations. The UK faces a number of challenges, such as climate change, energy security and the economic crisis. Sustainable development provides a framework which seeks to integrate solutions to such issues. The UK's current Sustainable Development Strategy, published in 2005, is supported by 20 high level framework indicators intended to give an overview of progress. The latest measurement of these indicators, in 2009, found four had improved, one had worsened, four showed a mixed performance, eight showed little or no progress and for three, there were insufficient data (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1

The UK's 20 sustainable development framework indicators in 2009

Indicator	Performance relative to baseline		
	Improved	Little or no change	Deteriorated
Greenhouse gas emissions	●		
Waste	●		
Resource use		●	
Bird Populations	Farmland		●
	Woodland		●
	Seabird		●
Fish Stocks		●	
Ecological impacts of air pollution	Acidity		●
	Nitrogen		●
River Quality	Biological	●	
	Chemical	●	
Economic Growth		●	
Active community participation		●	
Crime	Vehicle	●	
	Burglary	●	
	Violent crime	●	
Employment		●	
Workless households		●	
Childhood poverty	Before housing cost	●	
	After housing cost	●	
Pensioner poverty	Before housing cost	●	
	After housing cost	●	
Education	●		
Health inequality	Infant mortality	●	
	Life expectancy		●
Mobility	Walking/cycling	●	
	Public transport	●	
Social justice	Insufficient or no comparable data		
Environmental equality	Insufficient or no comparable data		
Wellbeing	Insufficient or no comparable data		

Source: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Sustainable development indicators in your pocket, 2009

Issues of potential interest to the Committee

3 Key issues on which the Committee could focus during the next Parliament are highlighted below:

- **The case for updating the Sustainable Development Strategy.** At the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, governments around the world, including the UK, committed to sustainable development. The last UK sustainable development strategy was published in 2005. The strategy represents a top-down framework within which government and society should operate. In practice, however, many environmental issues arise from specific concerns such as the risks associated with hazardous materials or the impact of greenhouse gas emissions on the climate. The Government has a variety of topic-based strategies to address these areas (e.g. on air quality, biodiversity, forestry and soil). These often include a limited number of specific targets and performance measures to monitor progress and they may be refined or developed in response to particular concerns. The Sustainable Development Strategy overlays these topic-based strategies. There has been no exercise to date to establish how well the strategy has driven more sustainable development across the wider range of related topics, particularly the social and economic aspects. The EU's planned revision of its sustainable development strategy in 2011 and the upcoming UN Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 provide an international context for the UK to consider whether its 2005 strategy is still suitable.
- **Sustainable development and cost reduction.** The new Government announced in its June Budget plans to make spending reductions of £99 billion a year by 2015-16 and to tackle the Government's deficit in a fair and responsible way. The Government has made no commitment to the processes it will follow to identify these savings and to appraise their impact on sustainable development. Sustainability and cost savings have overlapping, and potentially complementary, goals as they both acknowledge that resources are limited and involve doing more with fewer resources.
- **The UK approach to embedding sustainable development into government policy.** Government policies can influence the economy, society or have environmental impact; and impact on progress towards sustainable development. The Committee last examined the Government's approach to addressing sustainable development impacts in its consideration of policy in 2007.
- **Sustainability of Government's own operations.** Central Government departments have improved their performance against their targets to 2010-11 for recycling, renewable energy consumption, water consumption and waste on the Government estate. However, while year-on-year improvements have been achieved for carbon emissions and energy efficiency, Departments are not on track to meet 5 out of the 13 targets set by the previous Government. The new Government has set a target to reduce central Government carbon emissions by 10 per cent by May 2011.

- **Governance and accountability arrangements for sustainable development.**

Under the Sustainable Development Strategy sustainable development was a priority shared by all Government departments. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) was responsible for developing Government policy on sustainable development across the UK. The devolved administrations also have their own strategies and approach. Delivery of the targets on sustainable operations and sustainable procurement for England is overseen by the Cabinet Secretary with support from the Chief Sustainability Officer and the Centre of Expertise in Sustainable Procurement, both based in the Office of Government Commerce. The Sustainable Development Commission acts as watchdog and adviser to Government and reports each year on the sustainability of the Government's operations. Since 2008, when the 'Sustainable Development Ministers' Cabinet Sub-Committee was stood down, policy and progress towards sustainable development have not been overseen by a designated ministerial committee. These governance and accountability arrangements are concerned with performance against the Government's own sustainable development targets. Whilst important, the Government's own targets are only a subset of progress towards sustainable development as a whole. There has been no assessment to date of the effectiveness of the governance arrangements for sustainable development more broadly.